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The Influence of Edgar Cayce on John E. Fetzer

By

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Shortly before he died, John E. Fetzer said, “if they ever write about me, the title will probably be the ‘Nine Lives of John E. Fetzer’.” No idle boast, Fetzer indeed lived many lives, including the life of a dedicated spiritual seeker inspired in no small measure by the legacy of Edgar Cayce.¹

Born in Indiana in 1901 and headquartered for most of his life in Kalamazoo, Michigan, John Fetzer was a pioneer broadcaster who helped bring the first radio station to the region in the late 1920s. An astute businessman, he grew with the industry, making millions by expanding his holdings from radio into television, recording, and then cable. During this time, too, he acted on a national stage, called on by the federal government and the industry to assume positions of leadership to help manage the many aspects of an electronic media that was swiftly evolving into the dominant form of communications in the United States. In his day, though, Fetzer was best known not as a media mogul, but as the owner of the Detroit Tigers baseball team for almost thirty years beginning in 1956. By the time he died in 1991, Fetzer had been listed in *Forbes* magazine as one of the 400 wealthiest people in the United States.

Of his many lives, there was one, however, that he kept private until his last years: that of his life-long spiritual search, which led him from traditional forms of Christianity to an exploration of a variety of metaphysical religions culminating in the New Age. Fetzer attributed his business success in large part to his spiritual ideas and practices, but his quest for the New Age is made all the more significant because he used his wealth to institutionalize his spiritual vision in the Fetzer Foundation, later renamed the Fetzer Institute, a Kalamazoo-based organization with a 500-year mission to bring spiritual transformation to the world.

For Fetzer, spirituality was a recognition that all is spirit, which he conceptualized as an eternal, conscious energy that, if one were open to it, would inevitably lead one back to the “great central source,” which some choose to call God. The Institute was thus born of Fetzer’s desire to prove the reality of spiritual monism by funding research into the science of spirituality, which was its priority

¹ Some material for this essay is adapted from Brian C. Wilson, *John E. Fetzer and the Quest for the New Age* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018).

during the last years of Fetzer's life. Fetzer also hoped that the Institute would form a tangible and useful legacy of his spiritual search once he was gone. In this last, he was eminently successful, for long after his death in 1991, the Fetzer Institute continues to flourish, partnering on major projects from alternative health care to holistic education to programs seeking to promote love and forgiveness around the globe.

John Fetzer's metaphysical quest began in earnest in 1933 with a visit to Indiana's Camp Chesterfield, a kind of permanent psychic fair founded in the late 19th century. There, Fetzer was introduced to such diverse metaphysical traditions as Spiritualism, Astrology, Theosophy, Freemasonry, Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, and many others. It was there, too, that Fetzer first encountered the works of Edgar Cayce, who's published readings could be found on the shelves of the Camp's bookstore.² Although he never met Cayce in person, Fetzer was fascinated by all aspects of the "sleeping prophet's" life and work, and, in addition to many of the published readings, copies of later Cayce biographies, such as Gina Cerminara's *Many Mansions: The Edgar Cayce Story on Reincarnation* (1959) and Jess Stearn's *Edgar Cayce: Sleeping Prophet* (1967), held a prized place in Fetzer's spiritual library.³ Indeed, many of Cayce's teachings would have a decided impact on Fetzer's developing spiritual worldview.

Of all the themes touched upon by Cayce in his readings, Fetzer was most fascinated with those that dealt with past lives, lost civilizations, and alternative healing. In part because of his reading of Cayce, Fetzer believed implicitly in the reality of reincarnation and felt that he had lived many lives before. In the 1970s, Fetzer specifically began using the Ouija Board to identify and flesh out the details of several of his past lives, which stretched back all the way to a time when he was a ruler of Atlantis. The following decade, upon ordering the construction of a magnificent administration building outside of Kalamazoo to house his growing foundation, Fetzer had built a room at the center of the building to house eight bronze busts arranged in a semi-circle. The busts represented Socrates, Ramses II, Francis I, Joseph of Arimathea, Louis XIV, St. John of the Cross, Henry II, and Thomas Jefferson, all of whom, according to the booklet prepared for visitors, "John Fetzer believes helped nurture and bring humanity forward to a new level of awareness and potential." Beyond their historical importance, however, the eight men had a deep esoteric meaning for Fetzer, for he believed that he was the reincarnation of at least some if not all of the figures memorialized. Significantly, Fetzer called this

² TB 31 (Interviews Fetzer, John E.—Baseball, Spirituality February 9, 1984) (R02.14826) (Fetzer Archives), pp. 1, 34.

³ Gina Cerminara, *Many Mansions: The Edgar Cayce Story on Reincarnation* (New York: William Sloane, Associates, Publishers, [1950] 1959); Jess Stearn, *Edgar Cayce: Sleeping Prophet* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1967); Elsie Sechrist, *Dreams: Your Magic Mirror with interpretations of Edgar Cayce* (New York: Warner Books, 1968); Edgar Cayce, *Edgar Cayce on Atlantis* (New York: Warner Books, 1967) (All these books are in the Fetzer Archives). On the Cayce renaissance, see Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 171; Wilson (2018), pp. 50-51, 104.

room the “Hall of Records.” Edgar Cayce frequently predicted in his readings that such Halls, said to contain the ancient history and lost spiritual knowledge of Atlantis, would be discovered in Egypt, Central America, and Bimini as humanity transitioned into the Age of Aquarius. Fetzer was familiar with this from Cayce’s readings and from the writing of the Cayce student, Joseph Jochmans, and his own Hall of Records was a heart-felt homage to the “sleeping prophet’s” influence.⁴

Perhaps even more importantly, John Fetzer was excited by Cayce’s pronouncements on alternative healing, especially his proposals for energy medicine devices. In many of his trance readings, Cayce recommended a number of different therapies, including the use of castor oil packs, crystals, colors, Osteopathy, meditation, magnetic healing etc. He also recommended the use of “energy devices,” including the Wet Cell Appliance, the Impendence Device, and the unfortunately named Radio-Active Appliance (which had more to do with radio waves than radioactivity). The first two devices delivered a weak electrical current to the body, while the third “builds and discharges body electrical energies that revivify portions of the body where there is lack of energies stored.” All three devices, however, work on the same principle: according to Cayce, “Electricity or vibration is the same energy, same power, ye call God...” and “vibration that is creative is of the same energy as life itself.” Further, since “the human body is made up of electronic vibrations, ...each atom and element of the body, each organ and organism [has] its electronic unit of vibration necessary for the sustenance of, and equilibrium in, that particular organism.” Thus, “when the force in any organ, or element of the body, becomes deficient in its ability to reproduce that equilibrium necessary for the sustenance of physical existence..., that portion becomes deficient in electronic energy.” What the ailing body needs, then, is an input of energy to bring it (or a specific organ system) back to its proper level of vibration for healthy living. While the notion of re-charging the body with vital energy was an old one, Cayce’s emphasis on vibrational alignment as the mechanism by which vital energy acts was indicative of the dawning of a new phase of energy healing later called vibrational medicine.⁵

Excited by the potential of energy healing and other Cayce remedies, Fetzer in the last decade of his life sought a partnership between his foundation and the A.R.E. Clinic in Phoenix, Arizona. The Clinic, founded in 1970 by Drs. William and

⁴ Edgar Evans Cayce, *Edgar Cayce on Atlantis* (New York: Warner Books, 1967); Mark Lehner, *The Egyptian Heritage Based on the Edgar Cayce Readings* (Virginia Beach, VA: ARE Press, 1974), pp. 93-102; Jalandris (Joseph Jochmans), *The Hall of Records: Hidden Secrets of the Pyramid and Sphinx* (San Francisco, CA: Holistic Life Travels, 1980); Jalandris (Joseph Jochmans), *The Hall of Records Part One*, 4 volumes (NP: NP, 1985) (all these books are in the Fetzer Archives); FI 10 (Jochmans, Joseph 1983-1985 I): “Conversation with Joey Jochmans [in] Kalamazoo” (January 11, 1984) (R02.13187), p. 17-21; FI 10 (Jochmans, Joseph 1983-1985 II): “Fetzer Foundation Advisory Group—Joe Jochmans” (January 9, 1984) (R02.13188), pp. 15, 33-34; Wilson (2018), pp. 187, 192-95.

⁵ Mary Coddington, *Seekers of the Healing Energy: Reich, Cayce, the Kahunas, and Other Masters of the Vital Force* (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1990), p. 73; C. Norman Shealy, *Energy Medicine: Practical Applications and Scientific Proof* (Virginia Beach, VA: 4th Dimension Press, 2011), pp. 69-98.

Gladys McGarey, was designed to apply the holistic health ideas of Edgar Cayce as revealed in his trance readings. The McGareys had met Hugh Lynn Cayce, Edgar Cayce's son, while he was on a speaking tour in Arizona in 1955. It took them a while to accept Cayce's holistic approach to health and healing, which was based on the trinity of "Spirit is the life. Mind is the builder. The physical is the result." Once they did, however, they created the A.R.E. Clinic to promote and test his ideas, such as the medicinal use of castor oil packs and techniques to manipulate subtle energies. The Clinic operated under a "covenant relationship" with the Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.), the original Cayce research foundation, located in Virginia Beach, Virginia.⁶

In May 1984, John Fetzer sent a representative of the Fetzer Institute, Chuck Spence, to the Clinic on a fact-finding trip to "gather information regarding current activity in electromagnetic research and instrumentation." After a tour led by Harvey Grady, the head of Education and Research for the A.R.E. Clinic (and a psychic in his own right), Spence returned enthusiastically recommending some kind of affiliation to the Clinic. Soon Fetzer himself was visiting the Clinic and was likewise impressed (it probably helped that in conversation with Fetzer, Grady characterized the A.R.E. Clinic's work as a continuation of similar work begun in Atlantis). Grady was encouraged by Fetzer to write a grant proposal, which he did, calling for the creation of the John E. Fetzer Institute of Energy Medicine Research (F.E.M.R.I.). The Fetzer Board rapidly approved a \$311,846 grant for the A.R.E. project, and by November, Grady was hiring staff for F.E.M.R.I. and creating a technical advisory board consisting of noted scientists from many fields. The following February, the first meeting of F.E.M.R.I. was held in Phoenix in conjunction with the annual A.R.E. Clinic Symposium. Here it was announced that cardiologist and surgeon Dr. Edward Stanton Maxey would be appointed as the Institute's Research Director. The Fetzer Institute subsequently signed a 25-year "covenant relationship" with the Clinic, and on September 1, 1985, F.E.M.R.I. was up and running.

John Fetzer was especially keen that this new partnership undertake cutting-edge research on new subtle energy technologies to diagnose and treat disease along the lines that Cayce had predicted. As Fetzer was to put it later, his early reading of the Tom Swift books, which chronicled the exploits of the eponymous boy inventor, had primed him to anticipate great advances in all technology. He was indeed thrilled that he had lived long enough to see science catch up with science fiction in this regard, especially as it related to healing through advanced electronics. Thus, an important F.E.M.R.I. project was the evaluation of the effectiveness of the "apparatus for measuring the functioning of meridians and their associated internal organs" (A.M.I. for short) invented by Japanese parapsychologist, Hiroshi Motoyama. Based on Chinese acupuncture and the idea of the importance of the free circulation of chi (subtle energy) for bodily health, Motoyama's AMI reportedly could measure chi-energy flow at the body's 28 meridians and, through

⁶ This and the following four paragraphs are adapted from Wilson (2018), pp. 182-85.

computer analysis, diagnose energy blockages that could then be cured through acupuncture. In addition, the Institute also conducted an “Electro-Medical Device Evaluation Service” designed to scientifically test existing subtle-energy healing devices then in use at the A.R.E. Clinic, as well as creating a computerized energy medicine library and database. Later F.E.M.R.I. projects would include research into Kirlian photography for aura diagnosis, the medicinal value of castor oil packs, and the evaluation of the Cayce Impedance Device for the treatment of hypertension.

What’s more, international energy medicine research was given a boost when F.E.M.R.I. underwrote much of the cost of the first global Energy Medicine Conference, held in Madras, India, in 1987. One researcher, Dr. Karel Maret, even credits the Conference with originating and popularizing the term “energy medicine.” Brainchild of T. M. Srinivasan, a professor of biomedical engineering at the Madras Indian Institute of Technology, the Energy Medicine Conference brought together an international group of scientists working in the area, including staff members from the A.R.E. Clinic and F.E.M.R.I. Dr. Srinivasan, who at the time of the Madras Conference was working on perfecting a sophisticated biofeedback device, was invited to relocate to the A.R.E. Clinic in Phoenix as research director of F.E.M.R.I. There, he edited the proceedings of the Madras conference and began work on the Pulsed Electromagnetic Field (P.E.F.) Coil, as well as a version of the Motoyama AMI machine called the F.E.M.R.I. Acupuncture Meridian Evaluator (F.A.M.E.). The following year, 1989, Srinivasan traveled to Kalamazoo, where he was tasked with setting up in the in-house energy medicine device research laboratory for the Fetzer Foundation. John Fetzer was especially keen on this project, since he believed that such devices would only be developed in spiritually focused private labs where “hard science” can be employed by “minds which are inspired by the voice of divinity within.”

So promising did the F.E.M.R.I. research appear to be that John Fetzer envisioned an even closer connection with the McGareys and the A.R.E. Clinic. As early as 1986 plans were laid for a stand-alone John E. Fetzer Life Sciences Laboratory in Phoenix, and for an enlarged energy medicine treatment facility associated directly with the A.R.E. Clinic. Moreover, for the next two years, the Fetzer Foundation explored legal options for closer ties to the A.R.E. Clinic, including the incorporation of something called the John E. Fetzer Medical Institute, which apparently existed only on paper, but was designed to ease some kind of merger. None of these ambitious institutional projects ever came to fruition, but the relationship between the Fetzer Institute and the Clinic remained strong for the rest of the 1980s. By the time the Fetzer Institute ceased its funding in late 1989, \$1.5 million had been awarded to the F.E.M.R.I. and the A.R.E. Clinic.

In the years after Fetzer’s death in 1991, the Fetzer Institute has grown and its programs have diversified. Throughout the 1990s, the Institute continued to pursue programs in energy medicine and holistic health broadly conceived, although more and more focus was directed towards supporting mainstream studies of the emerging field of mind/body health. Around the turn of the

millennium, the Fetzer Institute moved farther away from scientific research on subtle energy healing towards the promotion of a practical spirituality for individual health and social transformation (see Fetzer.org). Nevertheless, the legacy of John Fetzer's scientific interests continues on in the Franklin Fetzer Fund, a branch of the Fetzer Memorial Trust (Infinitepotential.com), which partners with leading scientists to explore the frontiers of scientific knowledge in biology, physics, and consciousness studies in order to advance towards scientific views of reality that are holistic and integrated—views which both John Fetzer and Edgar Cayce would have heartedly approved.

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